

THE HISPANOPHILE IMPERATIVE: THE END OF AN AGE?

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Martial — M. Valerius Martialis, the crusty, often obscene and explicitly candid epigrammatist born in the northeastern iron-mining country of Bilbilis, today Calatayud in Aragón — was, as far as I can tell, the first to express the desire. In the dedication of Book XII of his epigrams he wrote: «non Hispaniensem librum mittamus sed Hispanum», which I construe somewhat liberally to mean — hoping to gain a little something in the translation — «not just another book on Spain but Spain itself». Martial was after the real thing, the truth about the country he had returned to live in after his childhood, the *true* Spain, which even then must have been difficult to come to terms with. Martial was after what Ernest Hemingway would come to call two thousand years later the «true gen».

Hemingway was no slouch when it came to writing on Spain: a number of his best stories, two novels and two books on the bulls — one very good and the other often very bad — are set there on that Iberian bull's hide. In the *good* book on the bulls, *Death in the Afternoon* (1932), Hemingway also made some interesting and germane pronouncements on books about Spain: «For one person who likes Spain there are a dozen who prefer books on her. France sells better than books on her. The longest books on Spain are usually written by Germans who make one intensive visit and then never return. I should say that it is probably a good system, if one has to write books on Spain, to write

them as rapidly as possible after a first visit as several visits could only confuse the first impressions and make conclusions much less easy to draw. Also the one-visit books are much surer of everything and are bound to be more popular. Books like Richard Ford's have never had the popularity of the bedside mysticism of such a book as *Virgin Spain* [by Waldo Frank]. The author of this book once published a piece in a now dead little magazine called S4N explaining how he did his writing... the gist of it was how this writer lay naked in his bed in the night and God sent him things to write, how he was 'in touch ecstatically with the plunging and immobile all'. How he was, through the courtesy of God, 'everywhere and everywhen'. ...God sent him some wonderful stuff about Spain, during his short stay there preparatory to writing of the soul of the country, but it is often nonsense. The whole thing is what, to make a belated entry into the pseudo-scientific field, I call erectile writing» (52-53).

Hemingway is, of course, only being mock serious here, even to the point of characterizing himself as «old Dr. Hemingstein... that masterful deducer» with «inner-searching Viennese eyes peering out from under shaggy brows» (53-54), but his point about books on Spain is well taken and he brings us to my central concern, which is a phenomenon I call the Hispanophile Imperative.

The Hispanophile Imperative is, to put it in the simplest terms, the utter inability to avoid writing about Spain. It flourished in Biblical and classical times, during the Romantic period, and again in the twentieth century. What is worst about the Hispanophile Imperative is that it has produced a steady stream of terrible books about Spain — usually the worse the book, the more superficial or stereotyped or pseudo-mystical the image of Spain (if you don't believe this, just try reading Waldo Frank's *Virgin Spain* and you'll see exactly what Hemingway was attacking). What is best about it are the superb books that explain Spain's radically different culture, heritage, and history to the rest of us unenlightened Westerners.

The Hispanophile Imperative exists because over the millennia Spain has fascinated the travelers who ventured here. Spain, as Michener wisely pointed out at the beginning of *Iberia*, intrudes into the imagination (5). Some love it and some despise it but few remain unaffected or neutral. North American literature is heavily colored by what Hemingway — to name only the most

famous — has written on Spain. And in England the tradition of traveling to Spain, that curiously chauvinistic habit the English have of going *out*, as they put it, for the exotic experience, goes back at least to the time when Dr. Johnson told Boswell, «There is a good deal of Spain that has not been perambulated. I would have you go thither» (1:409-10).

But, of course, the Hispanophile Imperative goes back much earlier, back, in fact, to some of the earliest literature we have. Southern Spain was known to the Hebrews as Tarshish and to the Greeks as Tartessos. Tarshish-Tartessos was a city, a river, and a kingdom, a mythic place, land's end, a country of fabled resources, the El Dorado of the ancient world. It was famous enough that trading ships became known to the Hebrews as «ships of Tarshish». The Greeks equated it with the Elysian Fields. It was the end of the world where the sun sank hissing into the sea, a mythic kingdom near Hades visited by Hercules who came to pierce triple-bodied Geryon with a single arrow and to steal his famous herd of red bulls. It was the abode of fairhaired Rhadamanthys, the edge of Atlantis and the site of some of Solomon's fabled mines. The Old Testament from Genesis to Jonah echoes the name Tarshish, and there, to the oldest city in the West, Jonah himself would have fled the Lord because Tarshish was the other end of the known world, the *finis terrae*, beyond which lay the Great Exterior Sea, the Abyss and the Palace of night. Vague and frightening stories of mud shoals, sea monsters, exotic islands, and flaming seas were told about the waters beyond the Pillars. Even Seneca, that stoic son of Córdoba and Rome, wrote that one day the Ocean would open up and a great land would be discovered (*Medea* lines 375-79).

In Roman times Spain, especially southern Spain, thrived as a literary topic, and Gades, the already ancient Phoenician city-state which is today Cádiz, was a favorite topic. Richard Ford, in my mind the greatest Romantic writer on Spain and a passionate student of the classics, understood the Oriental nature of that oldest of Western cities well: «It is quite clear», he wrote, «that Cádiz was the eldest daughter of Tyre» (323). To discuss all the Roman writers on Spain would take volumes, so I will have to let one quote about Gades from Richard Ford, who waxes eloquent as he gives away the Roman propensity for the Hispanophile Imperative, suffice: «Gades was the great lie and lion of antiquity; nothing

was too absurd for the classical handbooks. It was their Venice, or Paris; the centre of sensual civilization, the purveyor of gastronomy, etc. Italy imported from it those *improbæ Gaditanae*, whose lascivious dances were of Oriental origin, and still exist in the *Romalis* of the Andalucian gypsies» (315). Parenthetically, I might add that of those wanton Gaditanian dancing girls, the most famous was a certain *celebre vedette* named Telethusa who was none other than Martial's mistress. But that's another story we do not have time for today, just as we do not have time for the story some straight-faced Andalusian fisherman told Polybius about the bluefin tuna, which were called «Pigs of the Sea» because they got fat eating the acorns which grew on underwater sea-oaks in the water between Cádiz and the Straits of Gibraltar; nor time for the story of Geryon's famous red bulls which, according to literal Strabo, were so fat they had to be bled every fifty days so they would not suffocate. Instead we must move on to more recent times.

The modern Hispanophile Imperative developed from the Romantic movement. Spain was the only near, still geographically European place one could visit with the assurance of encountering the bizarre, the exotic, the Oriental, precisely what the Romantic imagination craved and fed on when it could. And the farther south the traveler ventured the more bizarre things generally became. The Romantics and their modern followers went purposely to Spain seeking, and *finding*, a peculiar exoticism that was understood by few of them. Andalucía was particularly different. They described it as exotic, strange, quaint, primitive.

Misunderstanding arose not so much from actual cultural difference but from a too facile explanation of the difference, even by Spaniards themselves, who lamentably often merely dressed the old Spanish stereotype in a new «suit of lights» and staged another performance of what Ortega once called the «Ballet of Sevilla» (6:112). Richard Ford, George Borrow, Alexandre Dumas, Gustave Doré, Rilke, Mérimée, Bizet, Byron, Washington Irving, to name a few of the most famous, found a world in Spain and especially in Andalucía that they reflected with varying fortune, sometimes to the detriment of our understanding of Spanish culture. Somerset Maugham, Montherlant, Hemingway, Dos Passos, Malraux, Walter Starkie, Gerald Brennan and Michener, again to quote but a few, confirmed the tradition, often in great style but

not in every instance with the greatest accuracy. Dumas declared roundly that Africa began in the Pyrenees. Maugham believed all Andalusians to be potential bullfighters, thought the key to Andalusian beauty was nothing less than the 6,000 *sevillanas* on display at the tobacco factory, and maintained that Spaniards were cruel to animals (but the English to their wives and children). Hemingway's worst gaffe was inadvertently to give María, his heroine in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, who was so pure that not even rape by the fascists could spoil her, an obscene nickname. Yet amusing as some of these faux pas, commonplaces, exaggerations, and clichés are, they also reveal the difficulty some of the best non-Spanish artists have in dealing with Spain and things Spanish. Spain is different. And the Hispanophile Imperative is very tempting, not to say compelling. But it can also be a very sharp two-edged sword: Spanish culture can be as dangerous to foreign writers as it is alluring.

And the fault does not belong entirely to foreigners. At least since Cervantes wrote the line «Cuando Preciosa el panderete toca» (787), which gives us the quintessential vision of the gypsy girl and her tambourine, there has existed a similar propensity among Spaniards to misinterpret or make dreadful generalizations about Spanish culture. Everyone does it. It seems as difficult to avoid as it is necessary to recognize and admit. In spite of everyone's ardent desire to express the truth about Spain, the *pandereta*, the symbol for the worst of the old stereotype, remains with us, threatening to drown out in its jingles and seductive beat anything of value we have to say. Because we fear falling into the trap of dealing with «Romantic Spain», we often avoid altogether some of the most interesting and complex issues that Spanish culture presents for our enrichment.

For foreign writers, it is, I think, the very paradoxical nature of Spanish culture that is at once so fascinating and so difficult. The oldest civilization in the Western world, it is simultaneously the most Oriental and the most primordial. To come to grips with such paradoxes is not, as the best foreign writers on Spain — Ford, Brennan, Hemingway — have understood, a facile or superficial undertaking. The foreign writer must always know precisely what he is talking about or run the risk of losing credibility.

The Sanfermines in Pamplona provide an amusing example of how easy it is to make a slip. When Michener wrote his chapter

on Pamplona in *Iberia*, he mentioned the young people sleeping in the banks, in fact, in rows right up to the teller's window. Where in the world, some of us who had been to the Sanfermines wondered, did Michener get such an idea? «Did *you* ever see anyone sleeping in a *bank*?» we asked each other. «No. Did you?» Then a few years later someone of the old San Fermín regulars discovered in the Tourist Bureau's pamphlet on the Feria the phrase: *los jóvenes duermen hasta en los bancos*. And the mystery became clear. Anyone who has been there during the July week-long hysteria has seen people sleeping everywhere: on the ground, in cars, on the *bancos* in the parks. One year I even saw some fearless or foolhardy soul sleeping in a tree in the Plaza del Castillo. You see people sleeping everywhere, in fact, *except* in *los bancos comerciales*, which are only open a few hours a day. But Michener, ever the intrepid writer, not only evidently confused the monetary *bancos* with the park *bancos*, but went on to embellish the affair and have the kids sleeping «boy-girl, boy-girl, boy-girl, right up to the teller's cage» (504). The story is now famous among Pamplona folk, but it is always told with a sense of delight and amusement.

On the darker side, the Hispanophile Imperative has had more unfortunate consequences for some writers. One most recent example, published in 1985 by Scribner's, is Hemingway's *The Dangerous Summer*, an expanded version of the articles he did for *Life* on the 1959 rivalry between Antonio Ordóñez and his brother-in-law, Luis Miguel Dominguín. Especially in the shadow of *Death in the Afternoon*, *The Dangerous Summer* is a sad book.

More than fifty years ago now, Hemingway wrote what is slowly but surely becoming accepted not merely as the great book on bullfighting in English, but as a classic on Spain and as a classic in American Literature. In *Death in the Afternoon* Hemingway recognized the cultural abyss yawning between the modern age and taurine Spain, and his love of Spain and Hispanic values turned *toreo* into a paradigm for grace under pressure. *Death in the Afternoon* is also a paradigm for the Hispanophile Imperative. Hemingway was constantly in search of a refuge from the modern world. He found that refuge in Spain and at the center of the Spanish labyrinth he found *toreo*. Hemingway's visceral, immediate and intuitive response to that spectacle, his perfect description of the ecstasy of a great *faena*, his insistence on the feeling of life

and death that the *corrida* gave him, and his inclusion of *toreo* as part of his inner life, indicate overwhelmingly that his conception of *toreo* was a spiritual matter, one of «true» phenomena he discovered in a lifelong quest for eschatological certainty.

Hemingway was the most atavistic of Northamerican artists. He saw in his best moments with the same kind of primordial and gnostic vision that suffused the best works of Lorca or of Picasso. He sought through art, as they did, a hieratic restoration of lost value in contemporary life, and his best writing rings with the elegaic plaint of a profane shaman for a return to our thwarted search for the sacred. *Death in the Afternoon* was, in essence, the work of a pioneer, a rebel and a seer. It was a call, like the *clarines* which announce the *corrida*, for the need to recover, however fleetingly, some of what we have lost in the modern age. His explanation and exaltation of the pristine savagery of the *plaza de toros* was tantamount to embracing an ancient mystery and iconoclastically rejecting much of what passed for modern Western values. In that light Hemingway becomes one of the great American Romantics and *Death in the Afternoon* his most Romantic book. That spiritual romanticism lies at the heart of the Hispanophile Imperative just as Hemingway's discovery of Spain lies at the heart of his best writing.

Thus it is that *The Dangerous Summer* — in spite of a few excellent passages — is a doubly bad book: it is sentimental, sloppy and self-indulgent in its own right and compared to *Death in the Afternoon* it sounds like one of those books on Spain Hemingway condemned so roundly. The passage I quoted at the beginning about books on Spain ends with this passage which is an unfortunately exact description of *The Dangerous Summer*: «Mysticism implies a mystery and there are many mysteries; but incompetence is not one of them; nor is overwritten journalism made literature by the injection of a false epic quality» (54).

Perhaps Scribner's ought not have published this enlarged, poorly edited, and, in effect, unfinished book by the failing master. But be that as it may, its publication cannot fail to remind us of the awesome dangers inherent in the Hispanophile Imperative. To purposely seek out such danger in writing about Spain reminds me a little of running with the bulls in Pamplona. To survive is an exultant experience but to meet a *toro suelto*, a loose bull, in

the calle Estafeta is to court disaster. It's a danger we all face in writing about Spain, a danger I incur even as I write.

The latest writer to be gored by a *toro suelto* is Sidney Sheldon in his *The Sands of Time*, the sixteenth best selling book of the decade of the 80's. It opens in Pamplona and has so many errors in it — the bulls charge *down* Santo Domingo, Estafeta is called Estrafeta, the *encierro* begins at 7:00 a.m. (instead of 8:00) and so forth — that it is obvious that Sheldon never set foot in Pamplona. He hasn't even done his homework. The use of the *encierro* is, furthermore, cynically sensationalistic, to put it mildly: «As the animals raced down the narrow street, half a dozen men dressed in the colorful costumes of the feria shifted the wooden barricades, and the bulls found themselves forced off the restricted street and turned loose into the heart of the city» (4). It only gets worse, the bulls charge a bright red truck and wreak havoc on the city.

But I don't want to end with such a patent absurdity, but rather with my question mark. *Are* we at the end of an age? Will the Hispanophile Imperative continue, or will it only be the kind of *españolada* Sheldon employs?

One thing seems clear to me: 1992 with the quincentenary and with Spain's full entrance into the Common Market does mark, symbolically at least, the end of an age. If Spain's cultures remain as defiantly distinct as they have in the past, the Imperative will continue, but if, as I suspect and fear, they succumb to the colorless homogeneity of the future, then the Hispanophile Imperative — not five hundred years old, but over two thousand — will only be a memory of the distant jingling of a *pandereta*, la *españolada*, Ortega's *Ballet of Sevilla*.

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